

Mythology feeds debate on future of small towns

BY MILAN WALL

The Journal Star's editorial on Aug. 17 called for a public debate to spawn new and creative ideas on how to help Nebraska's small towns thrive. The editorial

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cited data indicating that Nebraska towns since 1890 have shrunk in median size. On the average, however, town size grew from 939 in 1890 to 2,147 in 2000, counting the towns that survived between then and now (and excluding Omaha and Lincoln).

Conventional wisdom, so-called, often drives what we think is true about small towns. Here are the Heartland Center for Leadership Development's "Six Myths about the Future of Small Towns," which turn conventional wisdom on its head.

Myth No. 1: Towns that are "too small" have no future.

What's too small? In our experience, there is no magic number below which a town can't survive. Take tiny Nenzel, Nebraska, population 13. One of the local attractions is the Nenzel Community Center and Heritage Museum, built in the 1990s. Public buildings are supposed to last for 50 years, so the folks in Nenzel apparently believe their community has a long future ahead of it.

Myth No. 2: A community's location is key to its survival.

In the mid-1980s, when the farm crisis turned the town square in Broken Bow into empty storefronts, some community leaders volunteered that they were glad the community wasn't close to the Interstate Highway. Why? Because they felt like they were going to have to come up with solutions on their own anyway, and being too close to a major thoroughfare might lead them to think solutions lay elsewhere. Within a few years, the community was back on its feet and the town square was full once again. In today's economy, leadership is more important than location.

Myth No. 3: Industrial recruitment is the best strategy for economic development.

When industrial expansion was prevalent, industrial recruitment made sense. But today the competition is keen, the marketplace is global, and the opportunities for industrial attraction are few. Small towns today will succeed if they focus mainly on retaining and expanding the employers they already have and on nurturing entrepreneurship. In the last five years, Ord has focused heavily

on local business development. The result? Seventy-three new businesses, 10 business expansions, 21 ownership transitions and a total of 332 new full-time jobs!

Myth No. 4: Small towns can't compete in the global economy.

In 1961, Mary and Dick Cabela started a kitchen-table mail order business in their home in Chappell. Today, Cabela's is a global entrepreneurial success, shipping outdoor products to all 50 states and 125 countries around the world. Many other, smaller businesses dot the rural landscape and sell products or services internationally. With modern technology and shipping options, rural is no longer a handicap in the global economy.

Myth No. 5: The "best people" leave small towns as soon as they can.

Out-migration of talented younger people remains a challenge in rural areas. But the "brain drain" doesn't mean that there are no brains left. In fact, small towns are filled with capable people who, on a daily basis, make giant contributions to their communities in time, talent and treasure. Furthermore, a surprising number of teens in rural communities see themselves as possibly living in their hometowns in the future, according to recent surveys conducted in more than a dozen Nebraska communities.

Myth No. 6: The rural and urban economies are not interdependent.

Conventional wisdom sometimes suggests that metropolitan areas don't really need rural places anymore. But how could cities maintain their quality of life or grow their economies without farm products, wood products, energy projects and other natural resources that come from rural places? Raw materials and finished goods are shipped to urban centers through rural areas using infrastructure that is built and maintained principally by rural community residents. Cities and small towns, to put it bluntly, need one another to survive.

So, we welcome the debate, and we hope the Journal Star will help sponsor it and many Nebraskans will join it. And we hope that much of that debate will focus on how to strengthen the rural-urban connection so that all communities—both big and small—can grow stronger.

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